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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001711

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: PM ERDOGAN ADDRESS TO WESTERN THRACE TURKS
INCLUDES MESSAGE FOR EU

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: PM Erdogan, speaking to Western Thrace Turk minority members at a conference in Istanbul, urged EU member Greece to respect the rights of his "brothers and sisters" in Western Thrace. He stated publicly that efforts by the Government of Greece (GOG) to resolve problems facing the community would be reciprocated by the Government of Turkey (GOT). End summary.

12. (SBU) The Western Thrace Turks Solidarity Association held its 5th International Assembly on 16-17 September, bringing together nearly 2000 community members and sympathizers from around the world. A series of opening speeches, including one by PM Erdogan, drew attention to the challenges facing the Turkish minority community of Western Thrace and that community's associated disputes with the GOG. Speakers reiterated traditional claims that the Turks of Western Thrace are denied minority rights granted to them by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty and, more recently, by the European Union Acquis. Their specific grievances with the GOG include: denial of ethnic identity as well as restrictions on freedom of travel, expression, and ability to elect leaders of community foundations, among others. (Note: the GOG does not recognize the 150,000 ethnic Turks in Western Thrace as a specific minority but rather includes them among a general "Muslim minority" comprised of various ethnic groups throughout the country. End note.)

A Taste of Election Season Rhetoric

13. (SBU) Haluk Koc, Deputy chairman of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) parliamentary group, quoted party leader Deniz Baykal as saying, "Someone who hasn't visited Western Thrace can't become Prime Minister." He added that the problems facing the Turks of Western Thrace have become secondary to domestic problems in Turkey and that it is important to tell Turks (in Turkey) what it means to be a Turk in Western Thrace. Koc stated he wants to use his freedom of speech to speak out against GOG treatment of Western Thrace Turks and has already done so in Greek papers.

He also described the poor state of a Turkish school he visited during a trip to Western Thrace to stress that no GOT official has visited the region since Baykal's trip in the 1990's.

14. (SBU) PM Erdogan gave a passionate defense of his

Government's support for the Western Thrace Turk minority community. He described it as a long fight and recognized that "where we are now is not an ideal position but it is better than in the past and tomorrow will be better than today." He advocated approaching a solution through dialogue and spoke out against radicals, arguing, "We don't want extremists to take the lead." In that spirit, Erdogan claimed that he discusses the plight of the community with the GOG at every opportunity, adding that Turkey had an historical responsibility for the Turks of Western Thrace and that the dialogue will bear fruit. In addition to his advocacy for minority rights in Western Thrace, Erdogan stated that Turkey seeks to improve the lives of Western Thrace Turks through economic development and that the Turkey-Greece natural gas pipeline running through Komotini (in Western Thrace) is one such initiative that will improve conditions for the community.

What Have You Done for My Ethnic Minority Lately?

¶5. (SBU) While acknowledging a new phase of Greek-Turkish friendship, PM Erdogan stated that he has good relations with Greek PM Karamanlis but that he has the political advantage, since he has visited him twice in Athens while Karamanlis has yet to come to Ankara. Erdogan also drew comparisons between Greek minority rights in Turkey and Turkish minority rights in Western Thrace. He called

ISTANBUL 00001711 002 OF 002

upon the GOG to recognize the election of the Turkish minority community muftis, asking, "Do we elect your Patriarch in Istanbul?" He added that Turkey allows the Greek minority to restore churches but the GOG does not allow the same for mosques in Greece. "These problems need to be solved," he stated emphatically. "When they are, Turkey will give an appropriate, reciprocal response."

¶6. (SBU) Indicating he is aware that he has his own minority communities to deal with, PM Erdogan urged Western Thrace Turks to be good Greek citizens and to speak Greek fluently. At the same time, he pointed out they should never forget that in addition to being Greek citizens they are also EU citizens and should enjoy and exploit all of the privileges which come with that status. "Greece," he stressed, "is obligated to act properly as a member of the EU."

Litmus Test on the Horizon

¶7. (SBU) All speakers praised the name of Mehmet Emin Aga, the elected Mufti (local religious leader) of Iskece in Western Thrace who passed away on 10 September. An election is scheduled for 15 October in order to select a new Mufti. Both Koc and PM Erdogan called upon the GOG to recognize the results of this election by appointing the emerging victor. (Note: The GOG, arguing that Muftis have both religious and civic responsibilities, requires that Muftis be appointed by the Government. The Turkish minority community disputes this procedure and elects separate Muftis, which, since 1985, have not been recognized by the GOG. End note.) PM Erdogan urged all eligible community members to vote, reminding them that "one ballot equals one election--don't take it for granted."

18. (C) Comment: PM Erdogan's public declaration of GOT intent to reciprocate GOG initiated reform of restrictions on the Turkish minority in Western Thrace reiterates in public what we have been told privately. We have repeatedly urged the Turks to take a bold step, whether opening Halki seminary, restoring properties or easing restrictions on who can be elected (and who can elect) the Patriarch. In this speech, the PM openly offered to reciprocate on an issue that for the GOT has long been neuralgic. It is a significant message; we and Embassy Ankara will follow up. The timing is likely not coincidental, with the European Union due to release its 2006 progress report on Turkey in early November, and with Turkish ports and airports still closed to the Greek Cypriots. PM Erdogan, by stressing the link between Greek and EU citizenship, was nudging the EU to get its own house in order, while indicating that Turkey, too, may be prepared to take steps. End comment.
JONES